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ABSTRACT

This paper examines a university professor's roles in and experiences with teacher action research to promote professional development. The first section discusses the importance of linking preservice teacher action research investigation with inservice action research teams in schools. It explains that this approach begins with a structure and organization for partnership among experienced and inexperienced teacher researchers. The second section focuses on mutual inquiry on an identified curricular theme or topic, which is taught at both the university and school level. This section explains that the strategy begins with the substance and not the procedure for doing research. The third section discusses how to facilitate the partnering of institutions by bringing teachers together across school systems for shared action research. The paper concludes that teacher action research has provided a forum for self-study and ongoing analysis of paths toward change in schools. It suggests that it is important to find and articulate the bridges between individual teacher research and large-scale action research. (Contains 20 references.) (SM)

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Teacher Action Research as Professional Development in Schools:

Four Paths Toward Change

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School Wide Inquiry:

A Self-Study of an "Outside" Teacher Researcher

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My interest in teacher action research stems from my own beliefs in the power of connecting professional development and curriculum development as a path contributing to school improvement. My initial work with teacher action research involved working with small groups of teachers who were involved in projects which largely focused only on their own classrooms. As a facilitator of a masters program in which teacher research plays a central role, I watched as hundreds of teachers examined their own practice, explored a central question or issue which they identified, and experimented with ways to change their approaches in order to improve teaching and learning. Classroom research was occurring as per the "Robinson Crusoe syndrome" (Lortie, 1975), by teachers patiently implementing change in their own classrooms with little or no input from outside. Classroom by classroom, one teacher at a time...that was the pattern and it seemed to be extremely satisfying for the participating teachers.

Through these past ten years, I also was forced to acknowledge that the teacher action research initiatives, which thousands of teachers in metropolitan Chicago have learned over the past twenty years, seemed to have little impact on the schools in which the teacher researchers taught. Why was that? If teacher research is intended to not only address particular and immediate questions from teachers, but also contribute to theory and knowledge in the field of education and improve practice in schools (Oja and Pine, 1988), why then was the impact outside of single isolated classrooms so difficult to detect?

I have begun to examine this question, with a pointed focus on my own role, as a university professor who consistently has maintained a presence in k-12 schools. Thus, my contribution to this symposium is entitled "A Self-Study of an Outside Teacher

Researcher." For while I am examining my own roles and experiences in this challenge, I have also been interested in exploring more deeply just how and when those 'outside' the infrastructure of a school can become involved in a meaningful manner in teacher action research as professional development (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993).

Not long ago, I had a conversation with Joe Senese, an Assistant Principal at Highland Park High School in suburban Chicago. Highland Park is a school with a burgeoning history of action research as professional development. The movement toward action research as both a means and an end in the lives of teachers at the high school has been largely fueled from within. Although I have taught action research courses there at the request of the administration and have worked with specific teachers on action research projects, the work has not been a university initiative. It is the administration and the teachers at the high school who have propelled this approach forward, with minimal involvement of the university. Senese and I were discussing the potential for a more specific partnership, whereby student teachers and interns from Northwestern University could become a part of the action research lab teams that characterize their inservice program at HPHS. Because I have a history with some of the staff at HPHS, Senese felt he could be quite honest. *I have had conversations at conferences about forming a partnership with a university and, generally, others tell me, 'Don't do it.' Universities make it their project, their agenda and that's not what we're about here.*

There is significant support for this perspective in the literature. Zhixin Su, in describing a similar initiative in an urban school district in California, reported that teachers felt that the partnership was 'set up by the university, the only thing the district

decides is if there is space available and where people should go' (1998). In another instance, a teacher research collaboration project Thinking Mathematics (Hattrup and Bickel, 1993) was intended to combine the clinical insights of teachers, the recent research on mathematics and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) standards in order to construct a meaningful math curriculum for a school district. The researchers reported that teachers would gather with university researchers to discuss current research that all participants had read. What resulted initially from this approach was that the teachers became increasingly reluctant to share their classroom knowledge with each other or the university researchers. The goal of the research – to connect to teachers' own practice – was subsumed by a preoccupation with the research and teachers' own voices were lost. The assumption of hierarchy is difficult to overcome, the domain of research resides historically in the university. That assumption is challenged when teacher researchers in schools partner with university academics. The connection of tangible curriculum development to teacher research as professional development may be a valid means for such a challenge. The curriculum, in such a case, is not developed apart from the classroom by university specialists, but rather, is designed in classroom with teachers who are researchers.

A program entitled the Educative Research Project, involving the Utah public school system and the University of Utah, is one such project that explicitly challenges the hierarchical differences between teachers and academics (Gitlin, Bringhurst, Burns, Cooley, Myers, Price, Russell, & Tiess, 1992, as cited in Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen, 1994). Robyn Russell, a teacher researcher involved in this project, intentionally situated her own classroom research in a larger institutional context. She examined not only the

implications for her own individual practice, but also for her school and the profession at large. It is this awareness of scope that seems essential if teacher action research is to become a systemic and viable path toward meaningful change.

In this study, I have identified three ways in which a university "outsider" can not only support the work of teacher researchers in schools, but also collaborate and make meaningful change in his/her own practice. These approaches have emerged over the past two years from my own practice as a professor and as a participant in school reform initiatives. They may contribute to the dialogue about how such collaborations can be shaped and planned in the future. These are ongoing challenges for me in that I consistently examine my role and my own learning as a teacher researcher. Possible approaches to connect teacher research in schools with university collaborators include:

1) Linking preservice teacher action research investigation with inservice action research teams in schools. This approach begins with a structure and organization for partnerships among experienced and inexperienced teacher researchers.
2) Mutual inquiry on an identified curricular theme or topic, which is taught on both, the university and the school levels. This strategy begins with the substance and not the procedure for doing research.
3) Facilitating the partnering of institutions by bringing teachers together across school systems for sharing action research.

Linking Preservice and Inservice Teachers through Action Research

Preservice teacher education programs that incorporate an action research component are growing in number in the United States (Poetter, Badiali, and Hammond,

1999, Burnaford, Fischer, and Hobson, 1996, Gore and Zeichner, 1995, Ross, 1987) Teacher educators appear to view action research as a tool for reflection which moves beyond keeping a journal into the realm of impacting practice through systematic data collection and analysis procedures. Research suggests that as preservice teachers become more engaged in their field work during a teacher preparation program, they become more and more focused on "what works" in the immediate situation and less critically reflective in the ways that their university coursework suggests. (Goodman, 1986, Zeichner, 1981) In some cases, this immediate "need to know" results in the beginning teachers adopting the attitudes and methods of their cooperating/mentor teachers without genuine analysis and assessment. An action research approach may provide beginning teachers with the tools to systematically rethink their teaching *while* they are teaching. They can then base curricular and instructional decisions on real data rather than the lore of teaching they encounter when they enter schools as student teachers for the first time.

Some of the current work involving preservice teachers and teacher research stems from a university-generated project assignment for their students which requires the willingness, if not the active participation of experienced teachers in schools (Burbank, 1999, Poetter, Badiali, and Hammond, 1999). Preservice candidates enter the world of schooling with a project idea in mind and try to work within the confines of the school world to complete their projects and satisfy course requirements at the university.

This engagement of preservice teachers, while noteworthy and important to beginning teachers' learning, does not address the issues raised earlier in this paper regarding a path toward change and the intersection of professional development and curriculum development for participants. King and Lonnquist point out that "to the

extent that action research works only to reinforce existing practice or to implement programs mandated by people outside of classrooms, it will not be the vehicle of meaningful empowerment and change that is implicit in its promise" (1993). Teacher research generated by preservice teachers who are only temporarily at a school site does not appear to appreciably affect the work of faculty at those sites. Nor does it bring the university "outsider" into the realm of collaborative partnership with school teachers, beyond the negotiation of placement of students and teachers in compatible relationships.

What then are the alternatives to this model? What if the impetus for the action research came from the school rather than the preservice program? What if preservice and inservice teachers designed action research together? One must wonder whether such an initiative is possible or even desirable. I am beginning such an initiative with a school district and have encountered several parameters that invite discussion.

First, a team structure in a school building appears to be more conducive to this approach to action research than a departmentalized organization. Small teams of teachers, either interdisciplinary or content-specific, with common planning time, have the opportunity to arrive at inquiry topics and strategies together. Thinking of the endeavor as a time effort addresses the colossal issue of time, a nearly overwhelming obstacle to teacher research in schools. Cohorts or pairs of preservice teachers who enter into the process provide the support for each other as they engage in this unfamiliar process. Inviting preservice teachers to the table during these sessions may open new options. (Cochran-Smith, Garfield, and Greenberger, 1992). The preservice teachers often bring a stronger sense of the research process, because they are receiving support for it in their programs.

The experienced teachers can more readily suggest the areas for investigation. They have been in the classroom longer and they can identify needs which preservice teachers often struggle to name. The experienced teachers are looking for solutions to problems they have encountered firsthand. The questions that emerge are real; they have not been designed for an external audience or for a course requirement. This is not to say that preservice teachers cannot generate viable research questions, only that questions which emerge from the conversation grounded in experience may be more rich than those generated outside of practice. The resulting research may be more sustaining and sustainable for both beginning and experienced practitioners. As apprentice teachers engage in action research, they develop an increased awareness of the decisions they will be making as teachers.

Preservice/inservice teacher action research serves as professional development with a real product that is useful for all the participants in their classrooms both now and in the future. My assumption is that the preservice teachers will use the research in their own classrooms if the mentors also show evidence that they have found the research viable and useful, and if action research is a priority for the school as a whole. The process supports intelligent risktaking with an implicit sense of accountability for acting upon the results. Action research is not just a process to support change; it *is* change.

The second parameter for this type of collaborative teacher research is the explicit discussion of ownership. Is there a single question with a single product? If genuine collaboration exists, what are the incentives for participants to generate meaningful research? While I have no definitive responses to these questions, I suggest that conscious support – from both school administration and the university teacher education

faculty – for mutual authoring and presenting of research to a larger audience provides growth and an avenue for change at several levels. It seems quite common for preservice teachers to be required to "write up" their work and perhaps even present it to colleagues at school sites (Poetter, et al). I would propose though, that if the work belongs only to the beginning teacher, school structures and classroom practices will see little change. Voluntary participation, with accompanying university course credit, opportunities for sharing research with the larger school community and/or other school faculty teams, and university co-teaching options all would contribute to incentives for experienced teachers to collaborate. Team-authored action research enables sharing practice with less personal risk, which individualized classroom research cannot provide.

The third issue to address pertains to my role as the "outside" university colleague. How does this work inform my own teaching? How can the lessons learned by preservice and inservice teachers also be incorporated into my own teaching and research? If professional development and curriculum development merge in such an approach, what are the implications for programming in higher education?

Thus far, I have observed several school districts begin to engage in teacher research as professional development. For the past ten years, I have taught teacher action research courses at the university level to both preservice and inservice teachers. My contribution to an initiative, such as the one I've described here, is that of co-architect, observer of the process, and co-teacher. My own teacher research courses become enriched if I invite teacher researchers from schools to team-teach with me. As an outsider, I may also have the peculiar honor of helping to facilitate the process and learning from it at the same time. I can suggest resources and paths for inquiry, because I

have seen the process work on multiple levels in multiple contexts. And yet, I am a learner as my own university classroom becomes transformed by the collaboration. There is a similar shift in perspective for the faculty associates or supervisors of student teachers in schools. They are no longer interacting just with students, with only occasional conversations with mentors. They become privy to a process that is collaborative and can support that process. Such a shift in design offers new possibilities for assessment; I am no longer the sole assessor of product or process. There is possible input from multiple sources, including students, preservice teachers, experienced teachers, and faculty associates.

Mutual Inquiry

Little (1993) suggests six principles for professional development in schools:

1) Offers meaningful intellectual, social, and emotional engagement with ideas, materials, and colleagues.
2) Takes explicit account of the contexts of teaching and the experience of teachers.
3) Offers support for informed dissent.
4) Places classroom practice in the larger contexts of school practice.
5) Prepares teachers (as well as students and parents) to employ the techniques and perspectives of inquiry.
6) Involves governance that ensures a balance between the interests of individuals and the interests of the institution.

As schools take more and more responsibility for professional development, they may rely less and less on universities. At the same time, universities are searching for new ways of working with schools whereby research agendas and school reform agendas

are compatible and mutually satisfying. Action research supports collaboration among faculties at multiple sites to explore subjects and topics of mutual interest (Dilworth and Imig, 1995). Such collaboration is dependent on conscious learning on the part of all parties. It is enhanced by the application of knowledge gained in the university classroom as well as the public school.

Reform initiatives have offered universities and school systems incentives to propose projects for funding which contribute to student learning and increased achievement. Universities collaborate in order to support such work in schools. In Chicago, local universities are currently being partnered with specific urban high schools in order to systematically provide resources and teacher development to raise test scores. The universities, in turn, have access to research sites.

But if we were to consider Little's six principles with a view toward higher education faculty, what then are the implications for mutual inquiry? Can a university faculty member be a collaborative teacher researcher with classroom teachers? Little's first principle for development provides one avenue for such participation. University faculty have the capacity to make the engagement of intellectual ideas possible as co-learners in subject-specific disciplines with teachers. Little is done on university campuses to connect liberal arts/subject faculty with schools of education in and through opportunities that invite teachers to participate as well. The bridging of the gap between the subject fields and the schools of education in and through a teacher-research based model for professional development flattens the hierarchy and generates new ideas for teaching at all levels. It is my belief that the faculty in the schools of education are the links to make such events happen. They can be the conduit, linking subject matter and

focus with pedagogy, by learning with classroom teachers and developing curriculum which can be utilized across grade levels.

This summer, I will take the opportunity to examine just how such a process works firsthand. At Northwestern, we are planning two courses around a central theme of Democracy for Human Dignity. Registrants from urban and suburban schools will choose either a course on the Holocaust or a course on the African Diaspora. Teachers will develop curriculum, integrate technology resources on the topic, and engage with faculty who are not from the School of Education. I will take the African Diaspora course in order to learn about the literature and culture that can be utilized in my English Methods class and other literacy coursework. The collaborative teacher-as-researcher perspective provides the potential for continued dialogue across the schools and the university around a substantive curriculum, the language of teacher research will become shaped by common interests and reshaped by goals that are context-specific. The dynamics of teaching this content to students of different ages and in different socioeconomic areas affords all an opportunity for learning. In the end, all of Little's principles come into play if curriculum development becomes the focus of the action research. This is true whether the work occurs at the university or in a public school classroom. If teacher education faculty can extend beyond their own domains toward the liberal arts faculty expertise, then they too are taking the risks inherent in action research.

The instructor for the course, whose dissertation focused on the African Diaspora, wrote to me in early March. *I've never taught about teaching the Diaspora...I've never taught teachers. What do I need to know?* I contend that it is her expertise that provides

the teachers and me with a *way in* to the collaboration. Without the third party, the playing ground would not be quite as level.

Partnering Institutions

Teacher research is difficult to sustain, particularly in large, complex high schools. The issues are complex, ranging from the autonomy of subject area departments to the balance of power between administrators. District level requirements for staff development often preclude any attention to individualized inquiry or grade level needs beyond the ever-present attention to standards and student achievement. Study groups (Visconti, 1999), book groups (Pelletier, 1993) and other venues for expanding the scope of inquiry seem to more easily flourish in elementary schools where teachers are less isolated and more engaged with planning and working together. How then can teacher action research become developed and renewing at the high school level, given the present systemic structure and organizational demands?

One response comes from the power of cross-institutional sharing. In the summer of 1998, I was invited to conduct a three-day workshop for high school teachers on methods of teacher action research in Sterling, IL, about 125 miles west of Chicago. I immediately suggested that the workshop would only be successful if I could bring classroom teachers from Highland Park High School, who have engaged in action research and have stories to tell. The district agreed and four teachers accompanied me to Sterling for the workshop. It was during those three days that I realized how powerful – and how rare – this type of cross-site investigation and analysis was. The Highland Park teachers planned their portions of the workshop and distributed practical materials to their audience. The Sterling teachers became instantly engaged with their peers. It was my

role to provide the methodological framework for the action inquiry that the Highland Park teachers described. I provided the language – and the tools – to leave with the Sterling teachers so that they could then develop their own questions and pursue their own issues. They were equipped with real examples and concrete experience from the Highland Park teachers.

I began to sense a new role for myself which felt far more comfortable than the more traditional "inservice speaker" that is often an academic's only entrée into a school professional development programming. Because I was simply part of the larger process and part of the team at the teacher research workshop in Sterling, my stance as 'outsider' began to feel a little less distant. I was able to see the potential of the partnership.

The teachers from Highland Park have also been invited to educational conferences and to the university to share their work with preservice teachers. Other schools in the area are beginning to look at the potential for whole schools change and have invited this high school, a pioneer in the venture, to share what they know and do. Sterling teachers have begun to form action research lab teams. They have identified specific and tangible issues that they can address over long periods of time.

Teachers in large traditional high schools need models for this type of work; they desire working designs for learning and growing which are invitational and intellectually engaging. And yet, they are less and less comfortable with inviting 'outside experts'; that structure of inservice "sit and tell" has damaged all but the hardiest. This design may suggest a new look for professional development in those contexts.

Action Research As Professional Development in Whole Schools

Teacher action research has provided a forum for my self-study as well as my ongoing analysis of paths toward change in schools. University teachers, who are also researchers, must continue to find ways to examine their own practices while working with teachers in schools in professional development initiatives. Planning designs in which preservice and experienced teachers collaborate on action research projects is one mechanism for growth that extends further than individual classrooms and can have impact on university classrooms. Extending opportunities for inquiry beyond schools of education to other schools and colleges on campus as links through content to schoolteachers is another means for generating dialogue and moving toward reflective practice. Seeing professional development days as opportunities to link teachers with teachers, and theory with practice is another option which I am beginning to explore.

Recently, I interviewed Tom Pool, a high school English teacher who has been at the same school for 29 years. This year, he served as a facilitator of a cross-disciplinary teacher study group. I asked him what it takes to make such a group successful and how such a group could begin to see themselves as teacher-researchers. He confirmed that there must be a shifted expectation, beyond the delivery system that is the 'normal' inservice approach to professional development. He offered three new expectations that would serve teachers well: 1) the expectation that such a practice would result in 'self-scrutiny', 2) the expectation that what is accomplished will 'show up in classroom practice,' and 3) the expectation that administration believes 'this is important work.' Tom continued: *Teachers need to be given the freedom to explore and the rewards for that. We need the rewards for innovations that really lead to progress.*

All of these paths are undergirded by an assumption that systemic change through action research must embrace, but also extend beyond the personal narrative and individualized case studies of single teacher researchers. They suggest new ways of looking at university expertise and the need to find new ways of generating knowledge across situations and educational institutions. After fifty years of developing action frameworks for research, we see the blurring of terms regarding individual "teacher research" and large scale "action research" models (Jungck, 1996). Finding and articulating the bridges between those two ends of the continua is crucial and a worthwhile investigation for university and school-based research practitioners.

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